

# MASTER PLANNING

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Technical Bulletin 3

Summer 2003

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## Introduction

Land is a municipality's most basic resource. The use of land determines to a large extent the character and quality of life within the community. The rate, location and type of growth, and protection of unique features affect not only the municipality's physical appearance but also its need for public services and facilities. A municipality that plans wisely for its land use will be far better equipped to anticipate and deal with future demands and problems. The master plan provides a fundamental planning tool to help a community meet the challenge of making sound decisions related to its development.

The master plan is both a reference and policy document. It contains appropriate maps, charts and supporting text, which present the recommendations of the planning board, and offers guidelines for community decision makers. The plan should be the most complete source of information about current conditions and trends within the municipality. By developing coordinated policies within the master plan and addressing such topics as future development, transportation, environmental protection, community facilities, and fiscal management, the plan should help a community meet change responsibly, guiding its growth in an orderly, constructive manner. As stated in RSA 674:2: "The purpose of the master plan is to set down as clearly and practically as possible the best and most appropriate future development of the area under the jurisdiction of the planning board, to aid the board in designing ordinances that result in preserving and enhancing the unique quality of life and culture of New Hampshire, and to guide the board in the performance of its other duties in a manner that achieves the principles of smart growth, sound planning, and wise resource protection."

Preparation of a master plan is the major responsibility of the planning board (RSA 674:1), and it should serve as an aid to the planning board in the performance of its other duties (RSA 674:2). The board may elect to undertake the job itself or may engage professional assistance in completing some or all of the planning elements.

## Content of the Plan

The actual content of a master plan may vary from community to community. The determination of what is needed in the plan should be based, in part, on past experience, estimates of change in the community's overall economic base and future population, as well as the capability of land to support both future development and community facilities to meet the demand of future population. As set forth in RSA 674:2 "The master plan shall be a set of statements and land use and development principles for the municipality with such accompanying maps, diagrams, charts and descriptions as to give legal standing to the implementation ordinances and other measures of the planning board. Each section of the master plan shall be consistent with the others in its implementation of the vision section."

"The master plan shall include, at a minimum, the following required sections:"

- Vision Section
- Land Use Section

"The master plan may also include the following sections:"

- Transportation
- Community Facilities
- Economic Development
- Natural Resources
- Natural Hazards
- Recreation
- Utility and Public Service
- Cultural and Historic Resources
- Regional Concerns
- Neighborhood Plan
- Community Design
- Housing Section
- Implementation Section

Also, RSA 674:3-III states "... the board shall inform the general public and the Office of State Planning and Energy Programs (OSPE) and regional planning commissions and solicit public comments regarding the future growth of the municipality in order to involve citizens in the preparation of the master plan in a way which is most appropriate for the municipality."

## The Planning Process

The master planning process generally consists of five steps. These are:

- Visioning;
- Data collection and inventory;
- Data analysis and evaluation;
- Plan preparation and recommendations; and,
- Plan implementation.

### A. Primary Data Collection - The Visioning Process

Upon its decision to prepare or amend a master plan, the planning board must establish the direction in which it wishes to proceed.

What are the most commonly held community values? Does the community desire economic growth? Does the community desire to conserve open space? These



and many other questions may be answered, through the use of a community opinion poll or survey, focus groups, a community profile, or a workshop. The visioning process includes taking a look at where the community is today and where the community wants to be in the future. Keep in mind that the purpose of any visioning process is to help define the guiding principles and priorities for your master plan and the resulting regulations and ordinances. Deciding how to approach the visioning process should not be taken lightly; a well-planned process will ensure that the master plan is understood and accepted by the community. Here are some general guidelines on different techniques to involve the public. These are not independent approaches; using a combination of these techniques may work for your community.

1. Survey/Questionnaire: There are several methods for undertaking a survey to ascertain community attitudes and characteristics. These range from administering a door-to-door questionnaire survey to developing a survey

which could be mailed out, hand delivered with a mail return, delivered through the schools or local establishments, or available on a website. The important aspect of this process is to assure that the survey is properly designed (e.g. that the answers are in response to the right questions), and that the sample size is sufficient to assure that the results truly reflect the goals, interests, and needs of the residents of the municipality. OSPE keeps sample surveys on file and can direct a community to other sources for assistance.




2. Community Workshop or Profile: In order to plan for the community, it is essential that the planning board determine the density of development, the distribution of the residents on the land, family characteristics, employment, and resident attitudes concerning future needs and expectations. This type of information can be collected during a workshop or community profile process. UNH Cooperative Extension can offer assistance with community profiles and OSPE can provide information on the community workshop process.
3. Focus Groups/Public Forum: These techniques can also be used to collect public input on the master plan. Small focus groups can supplement other strategies when you want to be sure that you are covering a specific issue or concern fully. Generally speaking, they can be structured as invitation only to certain stakeholders and stay focused on a certain topic or a specific aspect of the master planning process. If you do open up the focus groups to everyone, you always want to make sure that certain key individuals are specifically invited. They are best used to brainstorm specific elements of the master plan. Information meetings or public forums about the master plan are also key to this entire process. You want to educate people about the process, show that you want the process to be open and emphasize that everyone's input is important.
4. Visual Preference Survey: A good "ice breaker" for any public input session is a discussion on visual preferences for your community - What do people like or dislike about their community? This is the perfect opportunity to get creative.


Hand out cameras and ask participants to take pictures of their likes and dislikes, collect the photos and schedule a follow-up meeting. This is a good stimulation early on in the process to get the public involved and interested in any follow-up discussions.

**And remember, always bring food into whatever you plan!**

## **B. Data Collection and Inventory**

1. Base Mapping: The planning effort should include the preparation of a set of base maps upon which to include geographically referenced data. The maps should include, at a minimum, a municipality-wide map at a scale of 1,000 to 2,000 feet to the inch, and a map or maps of built up areas at 100 to 200 feet to the inch. Data for this activity is available through GRANIT, New Hampshire's Statewide Geographic Information System. 
2. Land Use Survey: Using aerial photographs, field survey, or other sources, locate all natural and man made features such as residential, commercial, and industrial land uses on the base map. The base layers for this activity are available through GRANIT.
3. Environmental Inventory: Using USGS topographic sheets, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) soil data, and other information from state and federal agencies, delineate soil types, wetlands, floodplain drainage basins, slopes, and related information that might be useful in determining the ability of a particular piece of land to handle development. Data for this activity is also available through GRANIT.
4. Population Survey: From data available from the US Census, regional planning agencies, OSPE and/or from field work, prepare maps, charts or graphs showing population growth, composition, and distribution.
5. Economic Survey: From data available from the regional planning agencies, OSPE and/or the NH Department of Employment Security assemble data and trends on employment and business and industrial areas.

6. Housing Survey: Using data gathered as part of the land use survey and the US Census, assemble data on the quality, quantity, and location of housing within the municipality.

7. Street Survey: From information acquired from the land use survey, the local road agent or engineer, the NH Department of Transportation or GRANIT, develop a map which indicates the classification of streets and bridges by type, width, construction, and condition. 

8. Public Buildings and Lands Survey: From information gathered as part of the land use survey and local officials, determine the type, capacity, location, and condition of the town hall, schools, library, parks, fire station, police station, and other public buildings.
9. Utility and Public Services Survey: From information gathered as part of the land use survey and from local officials, determine the type, capacity, location and condition of water, sewage disposal, solid waste disposal, telecommunications, and other facilities.

## **C. Data Analysis and Evaluation**

When the collection of facts has been assembled, the planning process moves into the data analysis and evaluation phase - what do the facts mean? Evaluation of natural resources might show that the land most suited to development is also the best farmland. Evaluation of the community facilities and services data might show that the municipal water supply system will reach capacity in five years if present growth continues. Facts and trends should be compared with the community's goals and objectives - is the community moving in the desired direction? If it is, how can positive trends be reinforced? If it is not, how can the trends be altered?

1. Population: Review population growth over time and prepare projections for the period of the plan.
2. Economic: Review the economic data and develop projections based on an analysis of the trends relative to the type and extent of economic growth that can be expected. This analysis should include a review of municipal revenues and tax burden.

3. Public Facilities: Review each set of data acquired relative to public facilities and determine the expected life of each based on the population projections prepared under this section.
4. Environmental: Evaluate the natural ability of the soils and other environmental factors to handle development. This will include analysis of slopes, soils, floodplains, wetlands, presence of prime agricultural soils, erosion and sedimentation characteristics, and related information important to the municipality.

4. Community Facilities: This section identifies facilities to support the future land use pattern, meet the projected needs of the community, and coordinate with other local governments' special districts and school districts, as well as with state and federal agencies that have multi-jurisdictional impacts.



5. Economic Development: This section proposes actions to suit the community's economic goals, given its economic strengths and weaknesses in the region.

6. Natural Resources: This section identifies and inventories critical or sensitive resources in the local community and also identifies those shared with abutting communities. This section provides a factual basis for any land development regulations that may be enacted to protect natural areas. A key component in preparing this section is to identify any conflicts between other elements of the master plan and natural resources, as well as conflicts with plans of abutting communities. The natural resources section of the master plan should include a local water resources management and protection plan as specified in RSA 4-C:22.



7. Natural Hazards: This section documents the physical characteristics, severity, frequency, and extent of any potential natural hazards to the community. It should identify those elements of the built environment at risk from natural hazards as well as the extent of present and future vulnerability that may result from current zoning and development policies.

8. Recreation: This section identifies existing recreation areas and addresses future recreation needs.

9. Utility and Public Service: This section analyzes the need for and shows the present and future general location of existing and anticipated public and private utilities, both local and regional, including telecommunications utilities,

## ***D. Plan Preparation***

At this point in the planning process, the preparation of the master plan should follow the sections outlined in RSA 674:2. This is not meant to imply that sections cannot be completed in the order and format that is most appropriate to the needs of the municipality, or that additional sections could not be added. The actual content of the master plan will depend upon the individual municipality.

1. Vision: This mandatory section serves to direct the other sections of the plan. This section must contain a set of statements that articulate the desires of the community, not only for their locality, but for the region and the whole state. It must contain a set of guiding principles and priorities to implement that vision.
2. Land Use: This section translates the vision statements into physical terms. Based on a study of population, economic activity, and natural, historic, and cultural resources, it must show existing conditions and the proposed location, extent, and intensity of future land use based upon all the following sections.

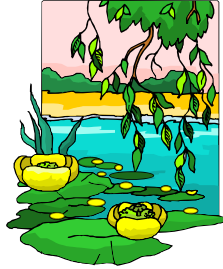
The master plan may also include the following sections:

3. Transportation: This section considers all pertinent modes of transportation and provides a framework for both adequate local needs and for coordination with regional and state transportation plans. Suggested items to be considered may include but are not limited to public transportation, park and ride facilities, and bicycle routes and paths.

their supplies, and facilities for distribution and storage.

10. Cultural and Historic Resources: This section defines cultural and historic resources and strategies or tools to protect them for rehabilitation or preservation.

11. Regional Concern: This section describes the specific areas in the municipality of significant regional interest. These areas may include resources wholly contained within the municipality or bordering, or shared, or both, with neighboring municipalities. Items to be considered may include but are not limited to public facilities, natural resources, economic and housing potential, transportation, agriculture, and open space. The intent of this section is to promote regional awareness in managing growth while fulfilling the vision statements.



12. Neighborhood Plan: This section focuses on a specific geographical area in a municipality that includes substantial residential development. This section is a part of the local master plan and must be consistent with it. No neighborhood plan can be adopted until a local master plan is adopted.

13. Community Design: This section is intended to identify positive physical attributes in a municipality and provide design goals and policies for planning in specific areas to guide private and public development.

14. Housing: This section assesses local housing conditions and projects future housing needs of residents of all levels of income and ages in the municipality and the region as identified in the regional housing needs assessment performed by the regional planning commission pursuant to RSA 36:47, II. The housing section integrates the availability of human services with other planning undertaken by the community.

15. Implementation: This section is a long-range action program of specific actions, time frames, allocation of responsibility for actions, description of land development regulations to be adopted, and procedures which the

municipality may use to monitor and measure the effectiveness of each section of the plan.

### ***E. Plan Implementation***

Without implementation the master plan has no value. Therefore, the success of a master plan in shaping future growth patterns and in influencing public policy decisions is dependent upon the degree to which the plan is actually carried out by those responsible for its implementation. The last section of the plan consists of recommendations for the codes, ordinances, regulations, or amendments to existing codes and ordinances, which are considered necessary to assure that the plan is carried out or implemented. Such proposals or recommendations may include a zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, site plan review, capital improvements program, and capital budget.

However, codes and ordinances are not the only means available to implement a plan. Land acquisition, construction of roads, schools, and other public buildings, controlling highway access, and construction of public water and sewer service, to name a few, all play a part in bringing about the community envisioned in the master plan. Public education related to these topics and the vision of the community as a whole is a key component of implementation. Consider developing a creative outreach document that provides a summary of the master plan's key components. This can be accomplished with a poster or a colorful newspaper insert. It's your plan so get it out there for all to see!

### ***F. Plan Adoption and Review***

The master plan is adopted or amended by a majority vote of the planning board after appropriate public hearing(s) (RSA 674:4). Copies of the adopted master plan must be filed with the city or town clerk (RSA 676:6, II) and with OSPE (675:9).



Time requirements for amending or updating the master plan are now well defined in RSA 674:3-II, which states "revisions to the plan are recommended every 5 to 10 years."

In conclusion, the importance of a master plan cannot be emphasized too strongly. The statute makes it clear that a master plan is required before a capital improvements program can be authorized and formulated (RSA 674:5), and a municipality, pursuant to RSA 674:18, is not permitted to adopt a zoning ordinance until after the



planning board has adopted at least the vision section and the land use section of the master plan. It is more important, however, that planning board members become convinced of the essential need of the master plan as the foundation for good land use planning and its relationship to good land use regulations.

### **Some Final Pointers on Master Plans**

1. Use the master plan process to build community consensus and resolve conflicting interests.
2. Recruit, recruit, recruit! Use your planning board alternates, find volunteers, and build as many stakeholders as you can.
3. Assign a committee to just work on outreach - newsletters, web site, press releases. Keep the master plan in the news.
4. Try to meet deadlines and keep them realistic.
5. Take advantage of the amazing number of resources out there, but, in the end, do what makes sense for your community.
6. If you hire a consultant, be clear on what tasks you want a consultant to assume.
7. Keep the master plan alive! It needs to be used if it is going to be relevant. Think about creating a poster highlighting a few key points and display it in your public buildings.
8. Ask the planning board (perhaps the alternates) to prepare an annual report on the master plan.
9. **And, finally, a good master plan is never finished!**

### **What Makes a Good Master Plan?\***

1. It presents essential data, but not too much. Keep all your back-up data in a separate appendix to keep the master plan user friendly.
2. It communicates a sense of place and an understanding of what is special about your community.
3. It puts forward goals and objectives that are capable of being translated into specific policies and actions. Avoid goals that are so general that they cannot be interpreted or applied in practice.

4. It translates these goals and objectives into implementation so that there is clear direction to the community on what needs to be done to implement the master plan.
5. It comes out of a process that solicits public input from a wide range of citizens and stakeholders, and describes the process that was used in preparing the plan.
6. It strives to balance development needs against the need to conserve and protect environmental resources.
7. It describes alternative futures and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action.
8. It tells a story and is interesting. It explains how the community is changing and what it will be like in the future if present trends continue.

\* Adapted from the Pioneer Valley CD, Planner on a Disk.